

Study: Heavy loads cost \$130 million

N.C. DOT probes road damage



By PAT STITH, Staff Writer

North Carolina taxpayers are losing nearly \$130 million a year because of damage to roads from trucks that weigh more than the normal limit of 80,000 pounds, according to a study by the state Department of Transportation.

The actual tab for heavy trucks is likely higher: That estimate does not include damage caused by fully loaded trucks allowed by the legislature to use secondary roads not strong enough to handle that much weight.

Judith Corley-Lay, the head of the DOT's Pavement Management Unit, said the study used truck weight data gathered by the DOT for federal pavement studies. For several years, the DOT has used weigh-in-motion equipment to weigh trucks without the drivers' knowledge.

The analysis, which Corley-Lay prepared, was the DOT's first attempt to estimate how much overweight trucks -- and trucks given permission by the legislature to exceed the 80,000-pound limit -- cost taxpayers in additional road maintenance.

"I realize fully that there are shortcomings in that analysis, but I think it is the best estimate we have at the present time," Corley-Lay said Thursday.

Her study was produced this past summer after The News & Observer published a series of stories about highway damage caused by overweight trucks. The N&O reported that the legislature had passed 10 laws since 1993 allowing various special interest groups to haul heavier loads and that overweight citations had dropped by more than 50 percent.

Damage caused by overweight trucks is exponential -- as weight increases, damage to the roads increases far faster.

A state law permits the DOT to set aside laws that allow some fully loaded trucks -- including trucks loaded with garbage, seafood, logs, sludge, Christmas trees, crops and other materials -- to use fragile secondary

roads. These are roads that have been "posted" with signs limiting access to trucks with axle weights of no more than 6.5 tons instead of the regular maximum of 10 tons. But the DOT has not used that provision to protect state roads.

Lyndo Tippet, secretary of the state DOT, told the DOT board in June that Gov. Mike Easley had encouraged him "to take whatever action is appropriate" to mitigate damage caused by overweight trucks. At a DOT board meeting Wednesday, Tippet was asked by a board member whether anyone was going to try to eliminate the weight exemptions.

Tippet replied, "I should say that's a secret 'cause it is, but, yes, there's going to be some effort."

In an interview later, Tippet said he would be working on the issue in the spring, when the legislature returns to Raleigh.

Rep. Nelson Cole, co-chairman of the Joint Transportation Oversight Committee, said in June that the state needed to start "reining in" some of the truck-weight exceptions and that his committee would take up that issue when the legislative session was over.

"These are issues ... we need to put on the table and invite the parties in to talk about it," Cole said in an interview last month. "Because, as you well know, we're running out of money to do what we need to do. And what that means is we need to look at every opportunity there is to preserve our pavement, because as roads are torn up we've got to replace them."

He said he expected the truck weight issue to come up as soon as next month.

Sen. Clark Jenkins, co-chairman of the committee with Cole, sponsored a bill in the last session that would have given homebuilders the right to drive fully loaded trucks on posted roads. It passed the Senate but was not considered in the House, in part because the DOT opposed it.

But Jenkins said he was "willing to listen" to proposed changes in the law and said some of the truck weight bills may need "tweaking."

The senator is a partner of W.S. Clark Farms in Edgecombe County. He said some of the farm and forest truck weight laws benefit his business, but he said he would recuse himself from any discussion of those laws.

In other developments involving truck-weight enforcement:

* The DOT board Thursday endorsed a study that recommended spending \$97.4 million to reconstruct and modernize the state's weigh stations.

* The DOT announced it would spend about \$750,000 a year for a transponder system that will gather information from trucks as they approach weigh stations. If they have a good record of compliance with weight and safety laws, the trucks will be allowed to pass the station without having to stop.

* The DOT expects by spring to finish posting an additional 1,000 to 1,300 bridges, barring fully loaded trucks from using them. The highway department should have posted the bridges as the legislature enacted laws allowing heavier trucks but did not.

* Enforcement of overweight truck laws has increased dramatically since May. In August, citations issued by the state Highway Patrol totaled 1,854, more than double the number of tickets written in August 2004.

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